The Wa'ab.

By Sh. Mohammed Abdullah Gobal of the Beni 'Amer.

YOU ask me about the wa'ab. Well you may, for though every small boy has heard of it, very few men of those now living here have seen it. In these modern days there are no wa'ab hereabouts; and even so late as thirty or forty years ago it was very rare. It has gone with the elephant and the buffalo and the teitel. This is its description. It walks on two legs, and is shaped very much like a man, though it is somewhat shorter. Its body and limbs are covered with a soft, hairy coat, like a kid's; but its face is bare, save for the eyebrows. Its features are like a man's, except that its nose is short, with the nostrils near the eyes. It speaks like a man, either in Khasa or Hadendoa[1], according to the land in which it lives; and they say that in Abyssinia it speaks Abyssinian. It has legs like a man's, but it cannot bend them at the knees, so that it never lies down, but sleeps leaning against a rock. It has five toes, the big toe very much longer than the others. It has narrow, humped shoulders, and hands like ours; but its arms are very short. They say that there is in Abyssinia a kind of wa'ab which is like ours, except that it has long arms; and the proof of this is that sometimes the Abyssinians skin them, and line the hides with silk, and put them on. An Abyssinian will do this in order to be unlike his fellows, just as he will wear leopard and lion skins. Such apparel, donned occasionally, is considered the mark of a vigorous man.

When the wa'ab was plentiful, men often killed and ate it; and the way they caught it was as follows: They used to set up in the ground a stake, either loosely planted or cut around the base, so as to be easily pushed over or broken. Then they would call to the wa'ab, saying, "O wa'ab, the trap is a trap for you."[2] The wa'ab hears and approaches, saying, "If God wills, the trap is for your mother and for your father

[1] Sh. Gobal is trilingual—Arabic, Khasa (Tigre) and Bedawi. He gave this lecture in Arabic, except when quoting the conventional conversations between the wa'ab and its captors. These he gave in Bedawi, explaining that most of his information came from Hadendoa sources; but he also gave the equivalent in Khasa. Both are quoted in the footnotes.

[2] Bedawi: *Takti'iab, ō tāl tālōk.* (*Takti'iab* is the Bedawi for *wa'ab*, and means "resembling a man.")
Khasa; *Wa'db, tāl, tālkdtu.*

and for you yourselves."[1] Then it runs away, for it can run swifter than a bird flies; but always it returns. And because, being a liar itself, it thinks all men are liars, and also because it is much troubled by lice, it foolishly approaches the stake and scratches its head upon it, saying, "Let us make the experiment."[2] Then the stake falls, and the wa'ab falls with it; and, having short arms and no joints in its legs, it cannot get up again. Then the men run up and seize the wa'ab, who cries out, "I am taken, I am taken!"[3] If the wa'ab's brother or uncle's son is within hearing, it calls in answer, "You brought it on yourself"[4] (though the speaker, when its turn comes, is no wiser). Then the men slaughter the wa'ab, and cook and eat it.

Sh. Mohammed Dirar Ali Yangi, of the Aflanda, will tell you how that in his grandfather's time some of the Aflanda caught two wa'ab, who were brothers. They tied up one alive, and slaughtered and cooked and ate the other; but its flesh was very bitter. Now this was unusual; so they asked the other wa'ab, saying, "Why is your brother's flesh so bitter?" It replied, "Yesterday we ate sodom-apple; therefore is our flesh bitter." They asked it, "Will your flesh be bitter, too?" It said, "Mine will be bitter." Then they killed and cooked and ate it, and sure enough its flesh was bitter.

I myself have never seen a live wa'ab, but I have seen a dead one. It was while the Khalifah was still in Omdurman; though here the Mahdia had been over for four years. I was travelling with Mohammed Osheik, of the Lebad, from Afrik to Upper Khor Baraka; and we were passing through El Sherif Ahmed Omar's village in Karai. Ahmed Omar himself had been killed by the Dervishes just before, and his people, having lost all their flocks, were living by hunting. As we passed the village I saw what I took to be a corpse, lying on the ground, and two men standing over it. I did not know them, but Mohammed Osheik knew them for Windirer Osheik Or and Isa Kalag, both Lebad. I called to them, "What is it?" They replied, "*Takti'iab.*"[5] "What do you mean?" said I. "Wa'ab," said they. Now, of course, we had often heard of

[1] Bedawi: *Inshallah deitōkna tāl ťkăta, bābōkna tāl ťkăta, tālōkna ťkăta.*
Khasa; *Inshallah tal umkėljba, tal abukljba, talkeljba.* (For: *umka, lijba, etc.*)
[2] Bedawi: *Jerabāt éne.*
Khasa: *Nejerribu, nejerribu.* (Ar.)
[3] Bedawi: *Yabíknīheib, Yabikniheib.*
Khasa: *Dàbteini, dabteini.*
[4] Bedawi: *Abiéik t-hĕrŭa.*
[5] See Note 2.

wa'ab, but we had never seen one. So we stopped and looked at it. It was just as I have described—like a man, but its body covered with hair; long legs without joints, and human hands on short arms. This one's hair was black, and its face grey; but I am told that they are of all colours, like sheep and goats. I did not examine it closely, but they told me that it was male; and that the females had four breasts, of which the two uppermost only gave milk, while the two lower ones were dummies. They said, too, that wa'ab meat was very good, but we did not care to try it, and passed on.

Hamad Ibrahim, of the Gemilab—he is dead now—told me the following story:—

"I once caught a wa'ab in the usual way, and was going to kill and cook it. Came a Sherif, riding by on his camel; and the wa'ab cried out to him, '*Hasăbhōk, hasăbhōk*,'—as one would say in Arabic, '*Maḥsūbak*.' The Sherif stopped and said, 'Do not kill the man.' I said, 'It is not a man, it is a wa'ab'; but the wa'ab cried out again, 'I am not a wa'ab, I am a man; do not kill me.' At that I stood back from it, and the Sherif took his man, and went away. I heard later that the wa'ab said to the Sherif, 'Really I am a wa'ab, and not a man; but I said I was a man so as to escape death.' The Sherif said: "Villain, you have deceived and shamed me,' and would have killed it; but it ran away."

I am doubtful, however, of the truth of this story, because it is unlikely that a wa'ab—a congenital liar—would have spoken truly to the Sherif. Unfortunately, Hamad Ibrahim, the Gemilabi, is dead, and we cannot now cross-examine him.

Once when Thomson was Inspector here, he and I were trekking in the hills; and we found the track of a wa'ab. He thought that it was the track of an ostrich, but I explained to him that it could not be, because there was one big and four small toes in front, and none behind. He did not believe me. I can see that you agree with Thomson, but you are wrong. These tales make good stories, but there is more truth in them than you think. You have promised me £25 for a live wa'ab, and £10 for a dead one; and if God spares me I will earn the reward. I can find men who know the present haunts of the wa'ab, and I hope to be able to produce one before next March. I shall then be able to repeat to you the saying, "The wa'ab's way is your way"[1]; for you will not believe what you are told.

[1] *Kūm o wa'ab kūmōk inta*—the phrase is mixed Bed., Khasa and Arabic.